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Colonial narratives and systemic hatred against the Amhara in Ethiopia: making sense of genealogical dynamics

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ABSTRACT

Ethiopia is a home to more than eighty ethnic groups which lived in relative peace and social cohesion until an outbreak of ethnic tensions in recent years. The production of dominant anti-Amhara narratives and systemic hatred has not received adequate study, particularly relating to their historical roots and the impact of Italy's five-year occupation on the country. This article seeks to explore the ways in which narratives sowed during colonial times helped perpetuate systemic hatred against the Amharas in Ethiopia. During this period, there was a narrative that portrayed Amharas as an 'oppressor' ethnic group while other ethnic groups are 'oppressed'. This narrative was later ingrained in Marxist and ethno-nationalist political programs in the 1970s and left Amharas more vulnerable to various forms of hatred and violence across the country. Since 1995, the Constitution formally institutionalised this colonial narrative that seeks to 'rectify unjust historical relationships', suggesting the existence of an ethnic group perceived as 'oppressor' of other ethnic groups throughout Ethiopian history. Using archival sources and official documents, this article provides a genealogical analysis of colonial and post-Italian period narratives and examines how the current discriminatory laws and practices in the country are meant to perpetuate systemic hatred (and violence) against the Amharas in Ethiopia.

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1. Introduction

Ethiopia is the oldest civilisation that preserved its sovereignty from foreign invasion and colonialism (Rubenson, 1961, p. 8; Tibebe, 1996, p. 414). Ethiopia is also a diverse country; this is why Conti Rossini has described it as the 'museum of people' because it is home to more than eighty ethnic groups (Conti Rossini, 1998). However, the Italian occupation, which lasted from 1936 to 1941, left adverse marks in the country, particularly on ethnic Amharas (Pankhurst, 1999, p. 83; Zewde, 2001, pp. 150–77). During the Italian occupation period, there was a narrative that portrayed Amharas as an 'oppressor' ethnic group while other ethnic groups are 'oppressed' (Geremew, 2024, p. 1892). This flawed narrative, which Mehretu has described it as 'rhetorical malware', was later mainstreamed in

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Marxist and ethno-nationalist political programs in the 1970s (Mehretu, 2017, p. 45) and left Amharas more vulnerable to various forms of hatred and violence across the country. This has now become a systemic problem, where there is a belief that Amharas are genuine oppressors despite being largely excluded from and discriminated against by the systems of power. There is little to no awareness that this belief emerged from Italian colonial narratives that sought to divide and conquer the country. In order to deconstruct this narrative, it is important to understand its genealogical dynamics.

That said, the conceptual contours of genealogy have not been defined comprehensively in academic literature (Durie, 2017, p. 1; Kretsedemas, 2017, p. 1). However, Williams has defined genealogy as a narrative “that tries to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing a way in which it came about, or could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about” (Williams, 2002, p. 20). Indeed, some of the narratives will incorporate actual history, which, as Foucault aptly described, could be ‘gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary’ to some extent (Foucault, 1977, pp. 139–40).

Drawing on these insights, we consider genealogy as a narrative that stitch a certain (hi)story into the main discourses of the society and that could potentially shape the society accordingly. Here, genealogy is viewed not merely as a method for tracing lineage or ancestry. Instead, it is seen as a narrative tool that integrates particular stories, events, or histories into the broader narratives that societies express about themselves. In this article, colonial narrative means an ideology that dehumanise, antagonise and classify people to dominate them. Thus, a genealogical frame helps us understand the interplay between historical patterns, contexts and actors wielding some power in furthering and continually reproducing narratives of hatred and violence against the Amhara people. As a result, the process of hate and violence creation could generally be drawn from past and present that covers a range of issues, including the use of history, politics, narratives and international and constitutional laws (Parfitt, 2019, p. 12). We would like to demystify colonial narratives against the Amharas by asking where the hatred comes from and whether it entails genealogical dynamics. Using archival sources and official documents, this article seeks to explore how narratives sowed during colonial times helped perpetuate systemic hatred against the Amharas in Ethiopia. In doing so, it examines the ways in which various actors, particularly Italian colonialists and ethno-nationalists, coalesce in creating, reproducing and sustaining systemic hatred against the Amhara people. This is, of course, achieved using narratives and laws, ranging from colonial narratives to federal and regional state constitutions in Ethiopia, as illustrated in sections 3 and 4.

Before delving into discussions on the genealogy of systemic hatred against the Amharas over different time periods, it is important to clarify a couple of points. First, how Amharas and systemic hatred are defined in this article. First, defining who Amhara is *in and of itself* has been part of the problem in the study of systemic hatred against the Amhara people (Michael, 2008, p. 395; Workneh, 2023, p. 786; Yetena, 2022, p. 1269). While defining ‘Amhara’ is an elusive undertaking due to the varied meanings given to the term in academic literature, in this article, we have adopted a rather holistic interpretation of this term in the context of Ethiopia’s contemporary political economy to capture the overall dynamics it involves. These include: (1) those who have semitic ethnic background and live in the present-day Amhara region, in places like Gojjam, Gondar, Shewa and Wollo; (2) those who are defined by local administrations as members of the ethnic Amhara but live outside the present-day Amhara regional state; (3) those living in

contested areas such as Welkayit, Telemet, Raya, Dera and Metekel provinces, who, against their will, have been included in the Tigray, Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz regional states; (4) those who belong to other ethnic groups but are regarded, by ethno-nationalist actors or violence perpetrators, as Amharas due to their pan-Ethiopian political ideology; and (5) those who might belong to other ethnic groups but are regarded as Amharas due to their faith (i.e. Orthodox Christianity). For this article, therefore, defining Amhara should include ethnic, geographic, ideological and religious elements rather than merely classifying people by their descent or identity.

Second, although the concept of (systemic) hatred has not received enough scholarly attention in Ethiopian discourse, it is not new in legal instruments¹ and academic literature (Alkiviadou, 2018, p. 218; Barna, 2021, p. 296; Harrington, 2004, p. 49; Woods, 2011, p. 127). More generally, it could be linked and understood as a form of systemic injustice, which Haslanger has described it as a situation ‘when an unjust structure is maintained in a complex system that its self-reinforcing, adaptive, and creates subjects whose identity is shaped to conform to it’ (Haslanger, 2023, p. 22). This means that individuals or groups have no options than conforming to an unjust structure where hatred is created, reproduced, or inflicted upon them. In this article, systemic hatred means a form of hate that stems from social structures, including laws, policies, institutions and practices, which can generate not only asymmetrical relationships but also unjust effects on individuals or people due to their membership in identifiable groups (Alkiviadou, 2018, p. 218; Powers & Faden, 2019, p. 85; Rawls, 1971, pp. 7–11). It must be noted that we have not analysed the particular nature and types of hatred that Amharas faced or continue to face at the micro-level; instead, we attempted to discuss how systemic hatred against the Amharas is understood at the macro-level, embedded in the laws, policies or practices of the country.

The remainder of the article is organised into four sections. [Section 2](#) explores how Italian colonial narratives have been instrumental in perpetuating systemic hatred and violence against the Amharas in Ethiopia. [Section 3](#) discusses the ways in which post-Italian period narratives have opened the floodgates for ongoing hatred and violence against the Amharas in various parts of the country. [Section 4](#) examines on how the institutionalisation of ethnicity has formally contributed to systemic hatred against the Amharas. The last section offers some concluding thoughts and recommendations on how to counter these narratives in the current and future nation-building project of the country.

2. Italian colonial narratives on Amharas in Ethiopia

Shortly after the Berlin Conference (1884–1885) on the Scramble for Africa, the task of ‘civilising’ the Ethiopians was assigned to be undertaken by Italian colonisers (Craven, 2015, p. 31; Miller & Stitz, 2022, p. 14; Uzoigwe, 1984, p. 15). Early on, the Italians skilfully applied the ancient Roman strategy of *divide et impera* (divide and rule), exploiting or even cultivating any existing or potential regional, religious, ethnic, or internal rivalries among the ruling factions. For instance, Italian colonial strategists devised schemes known as ‘politica Tigrina’ (the politics of Tigray) and ‘politica Scioana’ (the politics of Showa) aimed at exacerbating any tensions or contradictions between *Neguse-Negast* Yohannes of Tigray and Negus (later *Neguse-Negast*) Menelik of Showa, whose well-known

ambition was to ascend to the Ethiopian throne as swiftly as possible (Negussay, 2005, p. 140).

There were controversies surrounding the Italian presence in the Horn of Africa both before and after the Berlin Conference. One notable controversy involved a famous treaty known as the Treaty of Wuchale between Italy and Ethiopia, which aimed to establish an Italian protectorate over Ethiopia and control its external relations (Negussay, 2005, p. 146). When Ethiopia firmly rejected the terms of this duped treaty, Italian forces invaded the country. However, in a historic turn of events, the Italian colonial forces were defeated at the Battle of Adwa on 1 March 1896 (Jonas, 2011, p. 111; Levine, 2000, p. 12; Metaferia, 2005, p. 181).

Forty years later, in October 1935, Italian fascist forces led by Benito Mussolini initiated an atrocious military campaign against Ethiopia, partly to avenge their defeat in Adwa and to sustain manifold of Italian colonial ambitions in Ethiopia. They employed brutal military tactics, including the use of aircraft and internationally condemned mustard gas against Ethiopian civilians. Furthermore, they sought to challenge the very foundation of Ethiopian nationhood by claiming that Ethiopia was 'an empire' created by Amhara elites through colonial practices (Mockler, 2003, p. 47, 181). This strategy aimed to disenfranchise non-Amhara populations, thereby weakening collective resistance against Italian rule. While the Italian colonisers did not succeed in gaining the full support of all non-Amhara ethnic groups, they did receive significant backing from many within these communities, even after the failed colonial encounter.

The Italian colonial forces propagated distorted narratives against the Amharas to fracture the resistance. For instance, the Fascist General Emilio De Bono once made a disparaging remark about Amharas in an interview stating, 'The ten million "poor underfed brutes" of the Ethiopian Empire, whom Italy must prepare to liberate from the Amharas' (Mockler, 2003, p. 47). Regrettably, Italy's colonial ambitions fostered the narrative of 'Ethiopia as an Amhara colony,' which significantly weakened Ethiopian popular resistance (Kebede, 2003, p. 181). This view was subsequently embraced by Eritrean and other ethno-nationalist elites in Ethiopia (Kebede, 2003, p. 181).

Shaped and justified by the narrative of cultural differences between Western and non-Western populations, colonialism inflicted profound hatred and human tragedies on those deemed 'other'. Through the standard of civilisation, these peoples were subject to exclusion, exploitative inclusion, and the violent imposition of the so-called 'civilisation' (Anghie, 2005, p. 311; Kapur, 2020, p. 101; Mutua, 2001, p. 201; Tzouvala, 2020, p. 45). Thus, Ethiopia and its inhabitants, often perceived as 'uncivilised' among non-Western groups, were not exempt from becoming a testing ground and subject for the colonial experiments that began in the 1880s (Rubenson et al., 2021, pp. 3–38). The prevailing narrative of cultural superiority, saviour mentality or the standard of civilisation, was thus equally applied by the European colonial powers to dominate and 'civilise' Ethiopia and its indigenous population broadly and Amharas particularly (Yates, 2013, p. 90). Hence, Ethiopia was regarded merely as part of the 'uncivilised' African populace by the self-proclaimed 'civilisers' of the world (Negussay, 2005, p. 134).

At the core of colonial narratives, the resounding defeat of Italy at the Battle of Adwa halted the penetration of 'colonial civilisation' – a concept guided by the general narrative of cultural superiority – in Ethiopia. This defeat compelled the collective minds of Italian colonialists to devise a better narrative specifically tailored

to the resistant and defiant Ethiopia. Although both the British and Italians had experiences manipulating internal power rivalries in their military encounters with Ethiopia, from the Maqdala to Adwa, their military operations and manipulations were informed by the narrative of a civilising mission and cultural differences between Europe and Africa. In the pre-Adwa periods, the specific narrative that European powers produced about Ethiopia portrayed it as a divided nation, merely provincial, akin to regions like Shewa and Tigray (Erlick, 1996, p. 196; Rubenson et al. 2000, pp. 7–14). It should, however, be noted that even in the pre-Adwa and in the interregnum between Adwa and the Fascist Italy's colonial encounter, Europeans (mainly British and Italian) had engaged in the 'racializing of Ethiopian territories' through a continuous manipulation and redefinition of imagined tribal or ethnic identities to the provincial leaders of the then Ethiopia (Yates, 2018, p. 231).

Following the Ethiopian victory, Italy shifted from the general civilising narrative focused on cultural superiority to the creation of a specific narrative emphasising internal cultural differences. It was from this shift that the anti-Ethiopian and anti-Amhara narratives of hate emerged (Rubenson, 2003). Therefore, the anti-Amhara narrative emerged as a by-product of the broader anti-African and anti-Ethiopian colonial narratives. The Ethiopian (and Amhara) resistance, culminating in a victory over the supposedly 'invincible and civilised' white colonial race, sent a shocking message not just to the Italians, but to all European colonial powers.

The defining moment for Ethiopia's independence, followed by Europe's relentless face-saving propaganda, facilitated the birth of anti-Amhara sentiment (Marcus, 2005, p. 229). Europe's 'Adwa-Complex' was not a problem that could easily be resolved by giving a racial justification for Europe's shocking loss in the hands of 'uncivilised' African people (Jonas, 2011, p. 228). The bitter defeat reinforces anti-Ethiopian views and compelled Italians to reimagine Ethiopians' pre-Adwa collective identity and their civilizational status as Africans (Yates, 2018, p. 231).

Between 1896 and 1936, Italy prepared to ward off the revenge of resistant and defiant Ethiopians. These preparations sought to include the potential use of the linguistic and cultural compositions of the Ethiopian State, enabling agents of colonial subjugation. This led to the advocacy of an Ethiopian-specific narrative, where cultural differences between Ethiopians were manipulated (and misinterpreted) by European and Italian political historiography. In fact, these narratives are, at least to some extent, based on historical realities, and that Ethiopia is indeed ethnically and culturally diverse. However, colonial powers manipulated and misinterpreted these facts, promoting a narrative that framed the Ethiopian state as an Abyssinian core with non-Abyssinian peripheries. The Abyssinian core ascribed, mainly, to Amharas and Tigres as the power nucleus of the Ethiopian State which practiced an 'Abyssinian imperialism' over the non-Abyssinian peripheries. Through this divisive narrative, Italians created the so-called 'colonialist' and 'colonised' cultural groups within Ethiopian State whose unity had once triumphed in the first organised military expansion in the age of European imperialism. It has also been noted that the reference and division of territorial Ethiopia and its people as Abyssinia, Abyssinians and non-Abyssinians had roots in European writings that preceded Italy's colonial use (Berhane-Selassie, 2016). Hence, Italy's agency would be invested in reproducing the pre-existing literary narratives in a way that quenches its colonial thrust, which must have been achieved by dividing and conquering Ethiopians as such.

Poignantly, the Italian colonial narratives against the Amharas did not end there. Through the misuse of colonial and Euro-centric historiography, Italy brought Ethiopia's situation to the international stage by pleading before the League of Nations. The League of Nations became a legal venue for the creation and reproduction of hatred and violence against Ethiopians (and Amharas). Although Ethiopia sought to use the League of Nations as a platform for international integration and resistance during the inter-war period, the League failed to live up to its expectations. Instead, it became a site for the creation and reproduction of Italian anti-Amhara narratives. While Italy's support for Ethiopia's admission to the League appeared positive on the surface, it was not a genuine acceptance of the latter's sovereign equality with the 'members of the family of civilized nations'. Rather, it was a strategy for preparing for another war, as the League would be weaponised against its supposedly equal member (Baer, 1973, p. 166; Getachew, 2019, p. 57).

Importantly, the Italian Memorandum, submitted and discussed at the League of Nations Assembly in 1935, encapsulated the prevalent anti-Ethiopia and anti-Amhara narratives of hatred that had been evolving since the aftermath of the Battle of Adwa. These narratives significantly contributed to Italy's aggressive war preparations, primarily driven by the racial complexities that Adwa had brought to the fore (Italian Memorandum, 1935, p. 40).

Fascism compounded Italy's colonial imperialist aspirations, already evident during the Adwa encounter, by reimagining the Ethiopian collective identity as 'African Savages'. This reimagining aligned with the broader Western and non-Western cultural difference, promoting a narrative that pitted Ethiopians against each other, which was particularly effective for subjugating Ethiopians under Fascist occupation. Unlike earlier imperial colonial expansions in Africa, this Fascist expansion closely aligned with national sentiment, thereby gaining popular support domestically (Srivastava, 2018, p. 21). Thus, the Ethiopian public, seen through its collective resistance and triumph as 'a stain on the honour of the Italian nation,' must have been dishonoured and avenged through fascist-written narratives of hatred and by the brutal force of a 'popular war' that could inflict matchless and enduring violence on the enemy. Fascist aggression and occupation of Ethiopia were indeed understood more as 'the colonial expansion of a white race', guided by racial hate and Social Darwinism, than as mere expansion of an imperialist state (Srivastava, 2018, p. 27; Strang, 2013, pp. 15–30).

Crucially, the section of the Italian Memorandum that narrates the political structure and conditions of Ethiopia is germane for a historical understanding of anti-Amhara colonial and racial hatred (Italian Memorandum, 1935, pp. 40–43). Italy started its pleading by urging the members of the League of Nations to understand the existence of a 'clear distinction between the Abyssinian State and its conquered territories' in Ethiopia (Italian Memorandum, 1935, 40). Such distinction was made through the difference in race, language, religion, history, and political and social structure alleged to have had existed between the 'colonial' Abyssinian State of Ethiopia and its non-Abyssinian conquered territories or 'colonies' (Italian Memorandum, 1935, 41). For example, the Italian Memorandum classified Ethiopia's population into two racial groups: Abyssinians (mainly Amharas and Tigrayans), who are considered Semiticized people, and the rest, who are categorised as Cushitic (e.g. Oromo, Sidama, and Somali) and Nilotic peoples (Italian Memorandum, 1935, 41).

In addition to that, the Ethiopian State, in its 1935 form, was 'composed of two regions which are clearly distinct both geographically and politically' (Italian Memorandum, 1935, 40). In doing so, Italy clearly asserted the existence of geographic distinctions between Abyssinians and non-Abyssinian conquered areas of the Ethiopian State. While the Abyssinian State has well-defined geographical boundaries mainly located in the northern part of the country, the non-Abyssinian 'colonised' areas, primarily located in the southern and southwestern parts of the country, have been the traditional enemies of the Abyssinian State throughout the centuries of their history (Italian Memorandum, 1935, 41).

Moreover, Italy's colonial reading of Ethiopia's composition through the lens of religion, language and other grounds generated the narrative of complete differences between Abyssinians and non-Abyssinians. For example, Abyssinians, because of their Christian faith, were completely different from non-Abyssinians who were Muslims and pagans (Italian Memorandum, 1935, p. 41). Abyssinians, because of their Amharic and Tigrigna languages, belong to Semitic linguistic family, whereas non-Abyssinians, who belong to the Cushitic and Nilotic families, speak totally different languages (Italian Memorandum, 1935, 41). In terms of their social and political structure, Abyssinians, because of their 'feudal' social structure, were completely different from non-Abyssinians who had their own non-feudal social structure (Italian Memorandum, 1935, 41). When it comes to history, Abyssinians and non-Abyssinians had a long history of war despite living together in one political polity. For example, the Emirates of Harar waged a relentless war against the Abyssinian State. The Abyssinian State, likewise, waged wars against the Emirates of Harar and other areas in the southern and southwestern regions of the country (Italian Memorandum, 1935, p. 41).

During this time, the Italian colonisers propagated narratives that cast the Amharas as the archenemies of other ethnic groups (Geremew, 2024, p. 1894). Therefore, it was this divisive colonial narrative that firmly cemented structural hatred against the Amharas by associating and separating them with other ethnic groups based on factors such as religion, language, race, political allegiance and history. This association arguably would have continued to shape the post-Italian period Ethiopian political historiography (Yates, 2017, p. 101). Victims of this concocted native colonialism should have therefore been named by the Italian Memorandum. Accordingly, beyond their subjection for Abyssinians colonial rule, the colonised non-Abyssinian peoples were portrayed as victims of oppression, exploitation, and 'ethnic cleansing' by the systems of slavery and *Gebbar*² which were ascribed to Abyssinians. The Italian Memorandum made this attribution clear that 'the slave trade [was] not due to a desire for gain, but also to the idea, deep-rooted in the Abyssinians' minds, that their victories [had] left them absolute masters of populations which, in their eyes are no more than human cattle' (Italian Memorandum, 1935, pp. 41–42). Hence, the Abyssinians' collective conscious and psyche were depicted as dominating and ruthless. It was thus due to these Abyssinian borne systems that the non-Abyssinian regions of Ethiopia were becoming a vast desert as their inhabitants were allegedly decimated (Italian Memorandum, 1935, 42).

But all these manipulated narratives and mischaracterisation of cultural composition and societal relationship of Ethiopians were made to subdue Ethiopians who were defiant and resistance to Italy's colonial dream. As such, the colonial project should be carried out only by advanced European States, such as Italy, which had

the capacity to ensure the development and welfare of the native peoples in Ethiopia (Italian Memorandum, 1935, 43). Interestingly, Italians must have entered in the Promised Land that was 'ideal for white race' (Prochazka, 1936, p. 6). In fact, Italian colonial aspiration was indeed befitting to international laws' general orientation to carry out Europe's 'civilising mission' in Africa and beyond. The use of the League of Nations and international law as legal means of production of racialized identities in Ethiopia through its divisive and hateful colonial narratives was indeed the legal Darwinism that shaped Italian juridical conception of race, civilisation, empire, sovereignty, colonialism and fascism (De Napoli, 2013, p. 801). What Italy ultimately brought to Ethiopians through their fascist colonial aggression and occupation was a series of unspeakable violence and unpunished atrocities (Campbell, 2017). What is worst of all in the legacy of 'Fascist bitterness', however, is that the seeds of hatred sown during colonial times remained at home and their spectre haunted or continue to haunt the Amharas, even though Italy left Ethiopia in 1941 (Sbacchi, 1997).

In sum, the systemic hatred and violence directed against the Amharas can be seen as an extension of longstanding issues, with its colonial and ideological roots tracing back to the period of Italian occupation in Ethiopia from 1936 to 1941. The cycle of systematic hatred and violence against Amhara continued in the post-Italian occupation periods, as the next section demonstrates.

3. The post-Italian period narratives and perpetuation of systemic hatred on Amharas

The post-Italian period in Ethiopia began shortly after the liberation of Ethiopia from Italian occupation in 1941. For Ethiopians and Eritreans of the time, this was a result of Ethio-Eritrean decades of anti-colonial patriotic resistance through arms and ardent international legal battling in the post-second world war negotiations of territorial peace (Negash, 2019). Despite their defeat both at the battle grounds and before international judicial forums (Negash, 2019), the colonial legacies of Italy and Britain would persist in Ethiopia (and Eritrea) through the agency of native intellectuals who succeeded the former in the process of reproduction of anti-Ethiopian and anti-Amhara narratives of hatred, division and disintegration (Taddia, 1994, pp. 493, 516).

During the post-Italian era, native inheritors and their enablers have set narratives for reproduction through mediums of knowledge production such as – political manifestos, historiography, law and armed violence – intended to foment violence and systematic hatred against the Amharas. Hence, what was international (European) would become national. The colonial would transform into native colonialism (Woldeyes, 2017, pp. 10–21). This is how the genealogical process of hatred reproduction has been carried out in the post-Italian period by native inheritors who 'exactly reproduce the tenets of colonial rule' in post-Italian Ethiopia and Eritrea (Kebede, 2003, p. 179; Mennasemay, 2005, p. 270).

By inheriting colonial narratives, post-colonial elites in Ethiopia and Eritrea fought against each other to liberate one cultural or ethnic group from an invented historical enemy, i.e. the Amharas. Territories that were assigned to certain ethnic group should therefore be freed from native settlers, i.e. the invented enemies that occupied others land. Hence, the liberation of Ethiopia from Ethiopians would

become the decolonial project of the already liberated Ethiopia. Through these colonially inherited myths, adherents of ethno-nationalism have agreed to reproduce 'the [perpetual] existence of the European colonies in Africa [Ethiopia]' on and against themselves (Prochazka, 1936, p. 7). Therefore, the categorisation of native peoples as belonging to different and unequal human races, a lasting legacy of colonial rule in Africa, was placed in the safe hands of loyal post-Italian period ethnocentric agents (Kebede, 2003, p. 178).

Moreover, the Eritrean factor in the genealogical process of creation and reproduction of anti-Amhara hatred and violence has been launched through the Eritrean liberation movements that upgraded the Eritreanisation colonial projects of Europe into ethnic mobilisation and militarisation against the 'Amharized' Ethiopian state (Iyob, 1995). It further created and reproduced through the ideological narratives of the Eritrean liberation movements (1958 onwards), violent armed struggles (by Eritrean Liberation Front since 1961), Eritrean statehood (since 1993), the Eritrean-Ethiopian inter-state war and hereafter (Fessehatzion, 1978, p. 29; Yohannes, 1987, p. 664). In almost all of these Eritrean oriented ideological and political narratives, the Amharas are cast as 'colonizers', 'oppressors', 'imperial capitalist exploiters' or 'chauvinists' where every ethnic group must wage a war on them and get liberated (Biziouras, 2013, p. 21; Weldemichael, 2012).

The post-Italian period Eritrean narratives and political movements developed contempt to Amharas and regarded them as 'utterly backward' and hence Eritreans, 'a civilized évolué'(evolved or developed colonised), had to be set free from the 'Amhara ruled' Ethiopian state (Kebede, 2003, pp. 176–78). This was a reaffirmation to and a continuation of an Italian-introduced dynamics of cultural (or racial) differences between and among the native population.

The Eritrean factor has contributed to the perpetuation of hatred and violence, and was embraced by the post-colonial disciples in Addis Ababa who follow the ethno-national Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries (Kebede, 2003, p. 176). Hence, the colonial and early (Eritrean based) post-Italian period evolutionary reproduction of anti-Ethiopian and anti-Amhara narratives set for a systemic hatred and political violence. The pace and scale of hatred during the revolution was supposed to be faster and larger than the slowly paced colonial hatred (Markakis, 1974). Besides the legacies they transferred to their post-Cold War successors, their radical revolution claimed a generation of older and young intellectuals who were at the receiving ends of the anti-revolutionary extra-judicial killings and red terror. It should be noted that the extra-judicial mass killing of officials and servants of the Ethiopian State under the Government of Emperor Haile Selassie could be taken as an earlier anti-Amhara violence that was driven by the narratives of the Radical Marxist-Leninist protagonists. The Military regime, though it mostly received a popular and historiographical excuse by its 'Ethiopian-First' rhetoric, was no less an Anti-Amhara regime (E. P. R. P. Manifesto, 1975 preface para v). Although the violence by the Military regime was mainly ideological, Amharas – christened as reactionaries – were victims of the violence as a rhetorically 'utopian, colonially grounded "socialist quest"' turned Ethiopia into a deadliest dystopian territory (Zewde, 2014).

Tellingly, ethno-nationalist parties such as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) have long promoted narratives that portray Amharas as national enemy of the Ethiopian people (Woldeyes, 2023). Indeed, the manifestos and historiographies of these political groups took the anti-Amhara hatred

and violence to another level (Berhe, 2004, p. 569; Gichamo, 2023, p. 2; Jalata, 2007). A case in point is the TPLF's political manifesto adopted in 1976. The TPLF's original manifesto from February 1976 (published in 1968 in the Ethiopian calendar) boldly pursued a public policy of systemic hatred, portraying Amharas as the oppressive enemy that dominated and even colonised the rest of the country (Gebregziabher, 2019, p. 470; Moges, 2022). The Amharic version of the manifesto's verbatim reads as follows:

...የአማራ-ብሔር በትግራይ ሕዝብ ላይ የምታደረገው ተፅዕኖ እንመልከት፤ በኢትዮጵያ ያሉት ጭቁን ብሄሮች በተለይ ብሄረ-ትግራይ በጭቁኝዋ ያማራ ብሄር የሚደረስባቸው ተፅዕኖ ከጊዜ ወደ ጊዜ እየጉለና እየተባባሰ በመሄዱ በብሄሮች መካከል አለመስማማትና መጠራጠርን አስከትለዋል። ይህ በመሆኑ የኢትዮጵያ ጭቁን ሕዝቦች በሙሉ በአንድነት ሆነው መደባዊ ትግልን ለማካሄድ ከማይችሉበት ደረጃ ደርሷል።

This is translated by the authors as follows.

...let's see the influence of the Amhara nation on the people of Tigray; the oppressed nations in Ethiopia, especially the Tigray people, are increasingly affected by the oppressive Amhara nation, which has led to disagreement and suspicion among the nations. Because of this, all the oppressed people of Ethiopia have reached a point where they are unable to carry out a class struggle together. (T. P. L. F. Manifesto, 1976, p. 8)

The manifesto proposes that the solution to this Amharas oppression is undertaking an anti-Amhara national oppression struggle (Geremew, 2024, 1899; T. P. L. F. Manifesto, 1976, p. 18). Particularly, the manifesto's verbatim states that 'የትግራይ ህዝብ ብሔራዊ ትግል ፀረ-የአማራ ብሔራዊ ጭቆና (...) ነው።' This is translated by the authors as 'The national struggle of the people of Tigray is **anti-Amhara** national oppression, (...)'

(T. P. L. F. Manifesto, 1976, p. 18). Throughout its manifesto, the TPLF accused the Amhara people of all the country's ills, including political, social, and economic problems. It should also be noted that denial of social justice and impunity has historically been the defining patterns in the process of creation and reproduction of hatred and violence on and against the Amhara people (Gichamo, 2023, p. 2). Unlike other Second World War victims, justice was never given to Ethiopians (in their collective) and Amharas as special targeted victims of the Fascist war crimes and ethnic cleansing (Geremew, 2024, 1907). In the same vein to the continuity of hate and violence, the culture of impunity and denial of justice to Amharas remains the political modus operandi of the post-Italian times. Hence, the perpetuation of victimhood and impunity continue as twin tragedies of the Amhara people, from past to present (Geremew, 2024, 1892; Woldeyes, 2023). As the defeated powers shifted from direct military confrontation to domination, they methodically crafted imagined identities from cultural and linguistic diversities. This strategy allowed them to divide Ethiopians, fostering systemic hatred and violence during and after the Italian occupation. As shall be shown in Section 4, the institutionalisation of ethnicity is often to blame as it prompts anti-Ethiopian and anti-Amhara narratives and systemic hatred.

4. The institutionalisation of ethnicity and its adverse impact on Amharas

When a society officially adopts ethnicity in its politics, it fosters a racial undercurrent (Atnaflu, 2018, p. 89; Mamdani, 2020, p. 35). Kebede powerfully articulates that 'the rise of ethnicity is thus nothing more than racism in the African (Ethiopian) style. It is definitely an expression of colonised mentality in that it classifies, separates, and excludes peoples on the basis of natural

characteristics' (Kebede, 2003, p. 180). This occurs because when ethnicity is exploited as a tool for political gain or becomes a source of division, it nurtures an environment conducive to the proliferation of hate speech, both online and offline (Kaye, 2019).

Undeniably, ethnicity has become a prime basis for people's identity and permeates all public and private life in the present-day Ethiopia (Abbink, 2011, p. 596). Similarly, Bieber and Goshu further argued that the excessive politicisation of ethnicity deeply influences both public and private spheres in the country (Bieber & Goshu, 2020). For example, they contend that individuals' interpretations of facts are often filtered through their ethnic perspectives; impacting upon the conduct of elections and even criminal investigations (Bieber & Goshu, 2020). As a result, the excessive politicisation of ethnicity exacerbates the spread of systemic hatred and violence against the Amharas in Ethiopia, as demonstrated below (Atnafu, 2018, p. 93; Ayele, 2019, p. 36; Degifie, 2019, p. 38).

In its stated goal to 'rectify the unjust historical relations' between ethnic groups, the 1995 Constitution of Ethiopia, 'supreme law of the land', made 'ethnic groups' sovereign of 'their respective tribal land' excluding 'others' and make them 'aliens' or 'settlers' of the 'racialized territories' (Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995 Preamble para 5, hereinafter Constitution 1995). The colonially borne racialized identity, as Ethiopianised by the radical post-colonial modernisers, ended up being the legal governance lexicon of Ethiopia (Tibebu, 2008, p. 345). Since 1995, Ethiopia has officially adopted a federal system based on ethnic lines (Abebe, 2014, p. 69). The 1995 Constitution is based on the recognition of ethnicity, prioritising group rights over individual rights (Constitution, 1995, Arts 8 & 47). For example, Article 8 of the Constitution stipulates: 'All sovereign power resides in the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia'. This means that the Constitution designates the Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples as the ultimate holders of sovereign power and custodians of the nation.

Thus, ethnically based federalism has served, however, to politicise ethnicity as the most salient individual and group marker, leading to new arenas, dynamics and dimensions of ethnic division, discrimination and exclusion (McDougall, 2007, p. 2). This means that the system based on ethnicity, coupled with its excessive politicisation of ethnic identities, has contributed to ethnic divisions, discrimination, and ethnic vilification in the country (Addis, 2022, p. 422). In this regard, Addis has described the Ethiopian Constitution as 'a suicide pact,' as it has the effect of alienating certain citizens, making them strangers in their own country (Addis, 2020). He further added:

Article 47 organises the various states along ethnic lines (as 'peoples') and names most of the states after the dominant ethnic group of the region. The description of the state excludes, both textually and symbolically, those Ethiopians who happen to belong to a different ethnic or linguistic group but live within the state border, regardless of how long they have called the place home.

This means that some ethnic groups who are 'natives' are technically active political participants, while others such as Amharas who are considered as 'settlers' are relegated to the role of political bystanders. While this form of governance believed to provide self-government opportunities for the ethnic groups in Ethiopia (Assefa, 2022, p. 108), critics argue that the tribal-based federation is the root cause of the country's chaos, including the proliferation of divisive hate speech (Fessha, 2017, p. 232). As Haile has aptly noted, the TPLF, who were the architects of the Constitution,

'implemented a Soviet-style federation that relied on ethnic self-determination for the creation of nine tribal homelands' (Haile, 2005, p. 11). This approach has resulted in asymmetrical relationships between various ethnic groups and in turn led to the excessive politicisation of ethnicity, with different ethnic groups asserting exclusive control over resources, privileges, and entitlements in their respective regions (Addis, 2022, p. 422).

Importantly, this has led to the creation of laws that discriminate against the Amharas based on their identity. When laws allow or enable discrimination based on ethnicity or other protected status, it becomes difficult to address systemic hatred effectively as it can be shielded under the guise of legal provisions (Ayalew, 2020, p. 57). As demonstrated earlier, the Ethiopian Constitution divides the governing of the country along ethnic lines and seeks to address 'historically unjust relationships', implying the existence of an ethnic group perceived as an 'oppressor' throughout Ethiopian history (Constitution 1995 Preamble Para 5; Woldeyes, 2023). According to this view, for example, the Amharas are perceived as 'oppressor' as against other ethnic groups in Ethiopian history (Geremew, 2024, 1897). This further ties in with the claim that the Amhara were portrayed as oppressors of other ethnic groups and seen as enablers of the feudal system, both during the transitional period discussions and the drafting of the Constitution (Keller, 1995, p. 630; Shiferaw & Tsehay, 2023, p. 164). Flowing from this, we argue that the Constitution has formally institutionalised colonial narratives, as discussed in Sections 2 and 3, leading to the establishment of tribal homelands or '*Kilile*' in Amharic, which in turn breeds hatred and justifies systemic forms of injustice and violence against the Amharas.

This is further evident from a review of certain regional state constitutions, such as those of Benishangul-Gumuz,³ Gambella,⁴ Oromia,⁵ and Harari,⁶ which have legal provisions that classify certain ethnic groups as 'native' while labelling others, for example, Amharas, as 'settlers' (Gedamu, 2018). According to the Amhara Association of America (AAA), a North American-based non-profit organisation, report published in 2022, 'The constitutional framework, including regional constitutions, dispossesses ethnic Amharas who live outside of the "Amhara Region", of basic fundamental rights regardless of whether they have resided in the non-"Amhara Region" for many generations where they had been living before the new majority ethnicities moved in and sometimes forcibly annexed these Amhara's ancestral lands' (AAA, 2022, p. 11). Hence, these laws not only perpetuate systemic hatred but also have effectively rendered 'millions of Amhara people into second class citizens in their own places of birth' (AAA, 2022, p. 11).

For Mamdani, native versus settler types of categorical divisions are rooted in colonialism which designated some groups as permanent minorities through the politicisation of identity (ethnic identity in the Ethiopian context) (Mamdani, 2020, p. 35). Mamadani aptly discussed the politicisation of identity (tribe) in South Sudan (Mamdani, 2020, p. 343). He argues:

With each homeland the preserve of a majority tribe, all residents of the homeland belonging to other tribes (that is, all minorities) will be subject to discriminatory practices when it comes to accessing land and competing for public office or public employment. This project will

make every citizen of South Sudan the member of a permanent majority in the appropriate tribal homeland and at the same time a member of a minority, not only in other tribal homelands, but also in a country of permanent minorities.

Certainly, these divisions perpetuate 'dominance over difference' and those individuals or ethnic groups who have been stigmatised and labelled as 'oppressor' or 'settlers' by the 'native' ethnic groups faced, or continue to face, hatred, discrimination and violence (Perry, 2001, p. 142).

In practice, Amharas have been subjected to ethnic-based violence and human rights abuses ever since these colonial narratives were given constitutional and institutional foundations. Let us examine how the magnitude and level of hatred against the Amharas have escalated into actual violence and ethnic-based attacks in two recent examples. The first instance looks at the situation following the murder of famous singer Hachalu Hundessa on 29 June 2020, which led to ethnic-based attacks against the Amharas in some parts of Oromia region in Ethiopia (Chala, 2020; Madebo, 2020; Minority Rights Group, 2020). Diaspora-based broadcast media and social media feeds in Ethiopia became engulfed with impassioned speeches about Hachalu's death, calls for violence and hateful remarks against ethnic Amharas, who were labelled as 'Neftegnas', which is an ethnic slur meaning gunslinger in Amharic (Ayalew, 2021; Gilbert, 2020; Madebo, 2020). According to (Minority Rights Group, 2020) report, the 'Oromo Media Network (OMN) operating from Minnesota, USA, broadcasted a series of inflammatory hate-filled messages, including calls to lock and burn the homes of Amhara people'. As a result, more than 239 civilians who were predominantly ethnic Amharas were murdered, and around ten thousand fled their homes and became refugees at churches (Meseret, 2020). According to rights groups, these attacks may amount to ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity (Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 2021; Minority Rights Group, 2020).

The second instance concerns the 'Tolle Massacre' where over four hundred Amharas, have been killed in East Wollega Zone, Oromia region, on 18 June 2022 (Human Rights Watch, 2022; ECLJ, 2024, pp. 10–12). One survivor of this massacre telling international media that Amharas are now being 'killed like chickens' (Press, 2022). Victims, reeling from this trauma, have reimagined their identity as follows: 'being ethnic Amhara is becoming a death sentence in Ethiopia' (Zelalem, 2022). According to (Lemkin Institute, 2023), there appears to be 'a systematic policy of erasing the Amhara presence in the East Wollega and Horo Guduru Wollega Zones by killing ethnic Amhara, looting their property, spreading terror among the local population, and forcing their displacement to other regions of Ethiopia'. It should therefore be noted that colonial narratives undoubtedly bred systemic hatred, which has now translated into actual violence, ethnic cleansing and the risk of full-scale genocide, putting the survival of ethnic Amharas in question (Atnafu, 2018, p. 77; Gilbert, 2020; Woldeyes, 2023).

Although systemic hatred and ethnic-based attacks against the Amharas have not sufficiently drawn fire from the international community, a few international organisations have publicly expressed their concerns. For example, the UN Human Rights Committee in its 2022 Concluding Observations on Ethiopia's implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) underlined that the Federal and regional constitutions and policies have created exclusion leaving 'settler' ethnic groups such as Amharas more vulnerable to discrimination and systematic hatred in their

country ('Concluding Observations on the Second Periodic Report of Ethiopia' 2022, 12–13 Paras 45–46).

Of course, the Ethiopian government is required under international human rights law to criminalise the advocacy of any forms of hatred. Article 20 (2) of the International Covenant on civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Ethiopia is a party, prohibits 'advocacy of national, racial and religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence.' This means that States must punish serious or systemic forms of hatred that incites discrimination or violence within the society. The drafting history of Article 20 (2) of the ICCPR contains a similar tone as: 'what the delegates had in mind was to combat the horrors of fascism, racism and National Socialism at their roots, i.e. to prevent the public incitement of racial hatred and violence within a State or against other States and peoples' (Nowak, 2005, pp. 468–75; Temperman, 2015, pp. 31–63). In that sense, part of the approach to the problem of hatred in the media and broader society could involve legal steps, among other things. However, this type of legal intervention would likely be simplistic and reductionist if it does not address the roots of the problem in the country. As rightly noted by the former UN Special Rapporteur, David Kaye, 'for hate is very much a function of politics and, as such, it requires first and foremost a political, national solution' (Kaye, 2019). No amount of legal force can repress systemic hatred when skewed narratives against the Amharas have been sown in a society. For this reason, understanding the genealogical dynamics and historical *raison d'être* could therefore help us understand some ways of finding answers, as the next section shows.

5. Conclusion

By showcasing genealogical power dynamics in different time periods, this article has demonstrated the ways in which colonial narratives created and perpetuated by Italian colonial powers brought about systemic hatred and violence against the Amhara people, leaving them without any meaningful political agency in their country. Drawing on archival sources and official documents, this article has showcased how the 1935 Italian Memorandum presented to the League of Nations Council, political manifestos, and the federal and regional constitutions of Ethiopia, *individually* and *collectively*, created or continue to create narratives against the Amharas from the past to the present. These instruments have been useful for those who have created, reproduced and perpetuated systemic hatred towards the Amharas in Ethiopia.

While ethnic Amharas and other groups once lived together in relative peace and unity, regional governments through their constitutions have been classifying distinctions between ethnic groups by labelling some groups as 'natives' and owners of the region and others like ethnic Amhara are considered 'settlers.' Consequently, both the Federal Constitution and regional constitutions have institutionalised ethnicity that created tribal homelands, which in turn fuels violence and systematic hatred against the Amharas. Acknowledging this, the UN Human Rights Committee, in its Concluding Observation issued in 2022, noted how these laws and government's policy have created exclusion and thereby leaving ethnic groups such as Amharas vulnerable to discrimination and systematic hatred in their country.

Addressing the problem should at least start with a proper understanding of the existing structural violence and systemic hatred against the Amharas. Repealing

discriminatory laws that sustained colonial narratives in the country is the first step that should be taken. Additionally, Amharas should draw important lessons regarding popular resistance and counteroffensive strategies from the history of anti-fascist resistance approaches that successfully combined national and international solidarity and resistance movements. Hence, resistance of all kinds could be considered a counter-offensive and a counter-narrative to the process of creation and reproduction of colonial narratives against the Amhara people. Future research on systemic hatred and violence against the Amharas should consider investigating the role of decolonisation in tackling colonial narratives and genealogies of power in Ethiopia and beyond.

Notes

1. The term 'hatred' is explicitly mentioned in several international legal instruments such as Article 4 of the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD); Article 20(2) of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); Principle 12 of the 2009 Camden Principles on Freedom of Expression and Equality and the 2013 Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.
2. Although the concept of the Gebbar system, commonly known as the 'Geber system', has its own nuanced features, in this context, it refers to a form of tax, tribute, or labour service paid by peasants to the emperor or ruling class in Ethiopia. See generally (Tibebu, 1995, p. 4, 71).
3. Revised Benishangul Gumuz Regional State Constitution, adopted 9 November 2020 (Amharic version, loosely translated). This Constitution stipulates that the 'Gumuz, Berta, Shenasha, Mao and Komo' are the 'native peoples' of the region and the rest are perceived as 'Settlers': at art 2.
4. Revised Gambella Peoples' Regional State Constitution, adopted 18 December 2002 (Amharic version, loosely translated). This Constitution stipulates that the 'Agnwak, Nuer, Mezenger, Oppo and Komo' Nationalities are the native peoples and sovereign power holders of the region': at Preamble para III, art 9.
5. Revised Oromia Regional State Constitution, adopted 27 October 2001 (Amharic version, loosely translated by authors). This Constitution stipulates that '[t]he Oromo people are the ultimate power holders of the region': at art 8.
6. Harari Regional Constitution, adopted 10 October 2005 (Amharic version, loosely translated). This Constitution stipulates that the 'Harari people' are the sole owners of the region: at art 8.

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